Charles A. Dickey

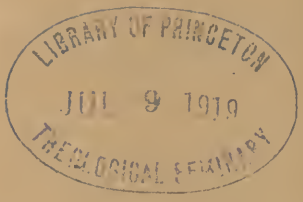
Martin Luther

BR
325
.D52
1884

LIBRARY OF PRINCETON
JAN 13 1961
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BR 325 .D52 1884
Dickey, Charles A. 1838-
1910.
Martin Luther, a sketch of
his character and work,

BW2222
.D55



MARTIN LUTHER.

BY

REV. CHARLES A. DICKEY, D. D.

LIBRARY OF PRINCETON
JUL 9 1919
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

MARTIN LUTHER.

A SKETCH

OF HIS CHARACTER AND WORK,

SUGGESTED BY HIS

FOUR HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY:

PRESENTED TO THE CONGREGATION OF CALVARY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA.

BY THEIR PASTOR
REV. CHARLES A. DICKEY, D. D.,
NOVEMBER 11, 1883.

Published by Request.

PHILADELPHIA:
MATLACK & HARVEY, PRINTERS AND LITHOGRAPHERS,
224–28 South Fifth Street.
1884.

MARTIN LUTHER.

The wide spread enthusiasm awakened by the Four Hundredth Birthday of Martin Luther, is, at once, a testimony to the personal power of the great Reformer, and to the mighty influence of the principles for which he so nobly contended.

This enthusiasm finds an easier explanation in Germany. Luther stamped his character, indelibly, upon Germany. His convictions and courage gave Germany a release from the bondage of the Papacy, that remained, the curse and weakness of her neighbors, and a heritage of liberty that has given her great power.

Luther gave Germany the Bible. The Bible has given Germany prosperity and power.

No wonder that Luther's Hymns inspire his countrymen in battle, and shake the strong towers of their foes. No wonder that after they have gathered the fruits of Luther's

faithfulness, for four centuries, his grateful countrymen should be moved by this enthusiasm, to do honor to his memory.

Men mark periods. Single men are clothed by God with singular powers, to meet the emergencies of trying times. God sends men into the world on special missions, to do special work. Luther was such a man.

A direct purpose of God, a divine commission, peculiar gifts, a wonderful fitness for his work and for his time, these are the distinct marks that make Luther conspicuous. Luther is so identified with the work of Reformation that concerns the world, that it is no surprise to find all Christendom vying with the Fatherland to do honor to the Teuton, who enfranchised and blessed the world.

This general desire to do honor to Luther shows what a strong hold his principles have upon the world. The current of the new life of the Reformation runs deep. The precious seed that Luther sowed, in strife and storm, has yielded a glorious harvest.

The gladness of this anniversary is a great sign of life and power in Protestantism. Luther's principles must live or Luther's memory would not be so sacred.

Let us hope that the retrospect may suggest to German-Americans the inconsistency of breaking down Protestant

institutions, which have their foundations in the truth for which Luther contended. By the force of a religious conviction we have gained our civil and religious liberty. Luther opened the Bible and revealed our inheritance. Those who cherish his memory should avoid contention, and, by united effort, defend the truth, which he had the courage to proclaim.

The people of Prussia, at home and abroad, should give good heed to the counsels of their Christian Emperor. In a letter to his son, the Crown Prince of Prussia, giving him a commission to carry his congratulations to the Wittenberg Lutherfest, Emperor William says:

"I feel," as an Evangelical Christian, and as the chief custodian of the government of the church, a lively interest in every celebration of the kind by which the Evangelical Creed may find renewed vigorous expression. I also highly appreciate the rich blessings, for our dear Evangelical church, which may come forth from the fact that her members everywhere have been reminded of the rich inheritance, and the illustrious benefits, which God, the Lord, has, through the Reformation, conferred upon us. At Wittenberg especially, the chief theatre of Luther's mighty and divinely-blessed labors, I would not be unrepresented at such a Fest, and this all the more, as it extends beyond the measure of a merely local celebration. I, therefore, hereby impose upon your Imperial and Royal Highness, my beloved, the duty of representing me at the festal service referred to. I beseech God, the Lord, that the approaching Lutherfest may contribute to the awakening and deepening of Evangelical piety, the futherance of good morals, and the confirmation of peace in our church.

This glowing tribute of the noble Emperor is ratified by the devout words of his royal son. Standing in presence of cherished memorials of Luther and his reforming associates in Church and State, the Prince said:

"In these rooms there have been brought together, in a very judicious manner, memorials of every description of the days of the Reformation, and to their increase and completion I wish a successful progress; for our people cannot be reminded often enough, nor vividly enough of the great blessings which they owe to the man whose name is borne by this hall. Who does not here, and to-day, reflect upon what, in more than one department of our German national life, the spirit and labors of Martin Luther have procured for us? May this fest, dedicated to his memory, be to us a holy admonition to hold those great blessings won for us by the Reformation in the same spirit in which they were wrested from the foe (sie einst errungen worden sind). Especially may it confirm us in the determination to stand up at all times for our Evangelical creed, and with it for liberty of conscience and toleration. And may we always continue mindful of this, that the strength and essence of Protestantism rest not in the mere letter or rigid form, but upon the living, humble striving after the knowledge of Christian truth.

"In this sense I greet the present and following days of the Lutherfest, with the heartfelt wish that they may contribute to strengthen our Protestant consciousness, to protect our German Evangelical church against discord, and to place her peace upon a firm and enduring foundation."

Characters are developed by the times in which they appear and act. Doubtless, Luther's stirring time did much to mould the great character we so much admire. But Luther did more to make his times thrilling, than his times did to make him conspicuous. It is the Reformation in

Luther that we admire, rather than Luther in the Reformation. There was scarcely a whisper of Reformation, before this monk uttered his convictions in the Convent of Erfurt.

The world was ready for a great event and a great man is furnished for the emergency. God's clock always strikes on time. God's times and God's instruments appear together.

Without Luther there would have been no such Reformation. Luther was, himself, the very incarnation of the Reformation. Luther was the first-fruit of the splendid harvest. He first felt the power by which he moved the world. No man was ever, more manifestly, the man appointed and prepared by God for a particular work, than was Luther, the man appointed and prepared by God for the work of the Reformation. He was as transparent as glass. He was as true as steel. He was as firm as a rock. He bewildered his opponents by the audacity of his courage. The careless composure, with which he met their threats, rendered them powerless to execute them.

We discover certain political complications, and personal protections that, in part, account for some of Luther's wonderful deliverances. We also discover a prudent dread in Luther's enemies that sometimes restrained them, when they were anxious to destroy him. But it is not possible to follow Luther through his eventful life, to see him continually ex-

posed to the vengeance and wicked plots of his enemies, to find him often in the very jaws of death, and not feel persuaded that there was a strange charm about his life.

The providence that protected Luther is as marked as the providence that commissioned him for his work. Luther was surprised by his own security, and each escape gave him deeper conviction and new courage, and determined a bolder assault upon the enemies of the Church. Every time that God 'hid Luther in his pavilion and covered him with his wings,' his principles seemed to put on new strength, his convictions struck their roots deeper and they found firmer hold. Luther was encouraged by the nearness of God, he felt the sympathy of Christ, his faith increased in power, he believed that his revolt was righteous, and was firmly persuaded that the truth which he advocated would triumph.

The great historian of the Reformation says: "We must study the Reformation of Luther to comprehend the Reformation of Christendom."

The Reformation was evolved from the heart and experience of Luther, and found its best illustrations in the struggles and triumphs of his life.

From his father, Luther inherited strength of character, and from his mother he inherited piety and these two forces, by the grace of God, accomplished the Reformation. Luther

took his name—Martin—from the Saint, upon the eve of whose day he was born, the 10th of November, in the year 1483.

Poverty was Luther's discipline, and the poor, with whom he mingled in his youth, suggested his work. "In the glowing fires of his father's furnaces he might read the prophecies of those purifying fires which he was to kindle in the earth." The hardships which God regards so affectual, were Luther's preparations for work. He had "hardness to endure," for God would make him "a good soldier." By singing carols in the streets he earned his daily bread. When he was homeless he found refuge in a Shunamite's compassion.

Luther's father was ambitious for other honors, than those with which God would crown his son. He sent him to the university to study law. But Luther's own thoughts turned early to God. God struck a light in the Library of Erfurt that changed Luther and his destiny. This was the light that revealed the path, that led Luther to his work and the world to freedom. From an old Bible flashed the light of heaven, the soul of Luther caught it and in joy, he turned it upon a dark and deceived Church.

Alas, for corrupt Rome! Luther has discovered the concealed light that will reveal her errors and crimes. Joy to

the world! Luther has found the key to life and liberty.

Strange enough, Luther's first Bible reading is the story of Samuel, God's ordained instrument, whom he raised up to deliver Israel from the oppressions of corrupt priests.

Luther is entirely unconscious of the plans of God which are working in him and with him. He does not know the full value of his discovery. He does not know that he has released the prisoner who is to redeem and reform the world. He does not know that his hand has touched the torch that is to light up the darkness that has been gathering and deepening for a thousand years, and to start a conflagration that should surprise the world. Luther's first thoughts are of himself. In the joy of his discovery he begins to struggle for a better life. He is terrified by sin and pleads for divine favor.

The Reformation has begun in Luther. Like Saul of Tarsus, beside whom, in his whole life and work, Luther stands so similar, he is called to a change of life and purpose. by a light from heaven. Barely escaping death in a storm, Luther suddenly renounces the world and gives up the pursuit of its honors. He buries himself in a convent and asks for the orders of a monk. He is brought by God into the very bosom of the Church which it is his mission to purify His refuge reveals more light. He finds another Bible

chained in the convent. It is his constant companion. Still bound hand and foot, in the prevailing darkness and ignorance of his times, Luther labored hard to be justified by personal sacrifice and works.

While in the agony of this conflict, under deep conviction and in great distress of soul, the light of a friendly heart cheers Luther's loneliness and sorrow. John Staupitz, who proved a true friend in many after trials, visited Erfurt, took a deep interest in Luther and taught him the way of repentance and faith that leads to holiness and to God. Staupitz gladdened Luther's heart with the gift of a Bible. God keeps the sword of the spirit in the Reformer's hand.

Immediately the power of a great preacher is felt. By victory over sin and by the discovery of truth, Luther is clothed with power to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

A distinguished professor, who heard him preach, declared, "This monk will put all doctors to the rout, he will introduce a new style of doctrine and will reform the whole Church; he builds upon the word of Christ, and no one in this world can either resist or overthrow that word."

Luther's fame, as a preacher, spread rapidly. He was hampered by hesitation, when urged to preach in the Church of the Augustines.

He is called to Wittenberg and receives the notice of

Frederic, Elector of Saxony, who became his life-long protector and friend.

All the while Luther is unconsciously gathering fuel for the great fire he is to kindle.

At the age of 28, full of reverent thoughts of Rome, Luther is favored with an opportunity to visit the sacred city. On the way, he is amazed and grieved to find in a Lombard Convent, the most extravagant indulgence and the worst forms of worldliness. His devotion is chilled by the profanity of priests. His pious soul is pained by the discovery of worse evils at Rome; where he expected to find the sanctity of heaven, in Christ's seat, he was horrified by the sport that was made of the Holy Sacrament.

"The nearer Rome, the fewer Christians," was the sad meditation of the astonished monk. The veil was torn from Christ's bride, whom he adored for her supposed virtue, and Luther was distressed by her depravity. In his anguish his heart seeking relief from its heavy burden, still leaning upon the broken reed, Luther prostrated himself at the foot of Pilate's staircase, and began the humble ascent, in the hope of finding favor with God. As he crawled along in self-debasement, he heard a clear and distinct voice, saying, "*The just shall live by faith.*" That moment the spell of superstition was broken, and the true light broke in upon

Luther's soul. The Reformer was free. Luther went to Rome to settle a dispute that had arisen among monasteries. But, on Pilate's staircase, God put the key of the Reformation into his hands, and, by a revelation of truth, qualified him for settling *graver* difficulties. Describing this experience, Luther says, "I felt myself born again, as a new man, and entered by an open door, into the very paradise of God. I saw the precious Holy Scriptures with new eyes; this text of Paul was to me, the very gate of heaven." This visit to Rome was the beginning of Luther's divorce from a corrupt Church, and he betrothed himself in confident faith to Christ.

Impressed by these significant events which were crowding about him, Luther began to feel in himself the growth of great purposes, and to hear more distinctly God's calls to a courageous service.

"Within my heart," he says, "*reigns* alone, and must alone reign, faith in my Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the thoughts that occupy me, day and night." Luther laid the foundations of his work of reform in earnest, simple, Scriptural preaching. He did not begin by proclaiming and assailing errors. He proclaimed the truth. He preached faith, the sole condition of salvation. He labored incessantly to impress leading

minds and close friends, with the great truth that burned in his own soul. He embraced every opportunity to put the good leaven into the hearts of the people.

While Luther was being thus quietly prepared for more perilous work, and for his closer conflict with a corrupt Church, the indignation of those who had still some reverence for sacred things, and some regard for the purity of the Church, was aroused by the disgusting and profane *traffic* of *indulgences*. The Church had become "a house of merchandise and a den of thieves." The procession of these venders of permits for sin was a sorry spectacle. Coming into a place in a gay carriage, with imposing horsemen, the profane vender would cry aloud, "The grace of God is at your gates." The Pope's indulgence was carried in sight, upon a velvet cushion, and beside it was raised a large, red, wooden cross. With songs and prayers and the smoke of incense, the sale began. With the air and manner of an auctioneer, the bold, bad Tetzel would cry, "This Cross has as much efficacy as the Cross of Jesus Christ—draw near and I will give you letters, duly sealed, by which, even the sins you shall hereafter desire and commit, shall be all forgiven you." "O, senseless people," he would continue, if the crowd was slow to accept his licenses, "Who do not comprehend the grace

so richly offered; this day heaven is on all sides open; this day ye may redeem many souls."

This was the unblushing crime of Rome that stirred the indignant soul of Luther to its depths. This treason against Christ determined him to declare war against the traitors. Such transparent deception and horrid blasphemy began to open the eyes of an oppressed and deluded people. They found themselves separated from God, impoverished, to pay profane usurpers a large price for God's free mercy, and reduced to a spiritual bondage that was degrading. The eyes and hearts of the people were looking for a deliverer. They were ready for the Reformation.

A fierce conflict was raging in Luther's soul. The thought of renouncing his allegiance to the Church and to its head, the Pope, whom he reverenced as the representative of Christ, distressed him. But neither could he silently endure such infamies and withdraw his protest. When the holders of these indulgences presented them at the confessional, in payment for sins, Luther protested them and declared them worthless.

This was his declaration of war. It meant more than he supposed, more than he intended. Luther, unconsciously, lighted the fires of the Reformation, which should spread over continents and purify Christianity. His rejection of

these worthless indulgences at the confessional, was but the duty of a faithful pastor, fearlessly discharged, but the still, small voice of the confessional became the battle-cry of religious freedom.

Growing bolder, Luther openly preached against the iniquity of indulgences. But his conscience could not rest satisfied in these milder protests. Still adhering in firm allegiance to the Church, and, in loyal recognition of the authority of his superior, upholding the character of the Pope, with no purpose of attacking either, he carefully prepared his bolder declarations against these abuses of authority, against this arrogant usurpation of Christ's power to forgive sins.

It was All Saints' Day. Crowds were gathering at the door of Wittenberg Church. The relics of the Saints were expected to quiet the consciences of worshippers.

With the courage of a lion, on the evening of the 31st of October, 1517, Luther pushed through the crowd, and in their presence, nailed ninety-five theses against indulgences upon the door of the Church.

These hammer strokes sent terror to the heart of a corrupt Church, roused all Germany, reverberated around the world, stirred the spirit of the Reformation, and, after nearly four hundred years, their echoes awaken joy in the whole earth.

Luther's action surprised alike his friends and his foes.

He did not "confer with flesh and blood." God and his own conscience prompted this act that made the Reformation inevitable. Luther's theses waked the world. Their immediate effect was tremendous. They are summed up in one bold declaration.

"God alone can remit sins, and only upon condition of faith in Jesus Christ."

Thus Luther, with a sublime courage, drew the sword of the Spirit, and set himself for the conflict which was to rage and deepen, and, by its success, deliver millions from the bondage of blindness and corruption, and give to the world the priceless blessings of civil and religious liberty.

Luther's own avowals show that he took steps towards an advanced position, which, at the time, he was not disposed to assume. God was calling and leading him and he followed in faith, "not knowing whither he went."

"I entered the controversy," he says, "without any settled purpose, or inclination, and entirely unprepared." God made Luther's unconsciousness his power. Conscious reformers are failures. Men who are impressed with their own power, and imagine themselves furnished for great work do not generally impress others with their power, or surprise them with their accomplishments. God held Luther to his task by uncovering his work slowly. In recognition of the

authority of his superiors, and with his usual frankness, Luther laid before them the convictions and protests which truth and conscience compelled him to utter.

But they left him alone with God and an approving conscience. The authorities of the Church condemned him. Fellow priests refused their favor. But "the common people heard him gladly," as they heard his Master, whose trampled honor Luther was brave enough to defend.

The people brought fuel to the fire that Luther had kindled. Within a month after their publication, Luther's theses were as familiar as household words. They began to awaken echoes in convents where pious, but powerless monks were mourning over the corruptions and errors of the Church. They were whispered at many altars where priests were pure, but had not courage to complain. Even the Pope was fascinated by the courage of the man who had struck this fatal blow against the Papacy. Timid souls, who would rather enjoy the peace of death than brave the weary conflicts that purify, expressed their fears and regrets upon every side. Luther received his deepest wounds in the house of his friends. His own order pled with him to recant and save them from the danger and disgrace of this revolt. Luther's calm, confident answer was: "If it is not of God, it will come to naught; if it is, let it go forward." Luther's own

accounts of his terrible dejection in this hour of suspense are distressing. They reveal his sincerity of heart and his humble trust in God. They give the lie to the charge that he was prompted by personal ambition, and show that he was actuated by the love of truth and his loyalty to Christ.

The bitter attacks of his enemies roused him from the dejection into which he had been cast by the coldness of his friends. Their violence developed a new courage. Luther terrified his enemies and inspired his friends by the spirit in which he met the assaults that were made upon him.

The wrath of Rome began to burn fiercely, and vengeance was busy devising plans for its execution. The first effort of Luther's enemies was to wean his powerful friend, the Elector of Saxony. They thought this would soonest check his influence and doom this dangerous man. But God had sent Frederic into the world to watch over Luther while he did his work. Frederic was the rock in the shelter of whose shadow Luther was to find refuge and rest.

When Luther heard whispers of excommunication, he anticipated the Pope's decree by preaching powerful sermons to show the folly of such attempts to stifle truth. There was an unseen army at Luther's back ever ready to rise in his defence.

At the Diet of Augsburg when the dread of a Turkish

invasion prevailed, Luther boldly warned the people that worse than Turks threatened them from Rome.

At last the Reformer is summoned to Rome to answer for his revolt. His friends are in consternation, but Luther is firm. The Pope is induced to change his order, and a Legate, with sweeping powers, is sent to Saxony to confer with Luther. It soon became apparent that Luther's convictions were more powerful than a Pope's decrees or threats.

It was in this trying hour that Luther's life was brightened by the friendship of Melancthon. His joy at meeting this man of God, who was to stand beside him in many a perilous hour, banished his troubles and dangers from his mind. Against the entreaties of his friends, Luther met the Pope's Legate to answer whatever accusations he might make. When asked by the arrogant Cardinal, who expected Luther to recant, "When all forsake you, where will you take refuge?" "Under heaven?" answered Luther, with heroic faith in God and the righteousness of his cause. "Had I a hundred heads, I would rather lose them all than retract the testimony I have borne to the holy, Christian faith."

In a moment of despondency Luther had thoughts of France as a safe refuge, where he might preach the truth and push the Reformation with less resistance. How differ-

ently might history have been written had Luther abandoned Germany and adopted France? Light and power and prosperity would have been differently bounded by the Rhine.

Luther's influence widened and deepened and flowed on like a mighty irresistable river. Driven by necessity, for he continued to dread an absolute divorce from the Church, he challenged the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, and unfurled the banner of Protestantism. When pressed to declare his creed, not intimidated by memories of martyrdom, he identified himself with Wickliffe and Huss. Excommunication came at last. Luther answered the Pope with courtesy and courage. He fearlessly laid bare the corruptions that had compelled the course for which he was condemned.

"I cannot retract," he says, "the word of God, which is the fountain, whence all true liberty flows, must not be bound." He repeats Paul's memorable prison declaration, and proclaims the freedom of the word of God.

Luther's Gethsemane, as it is characterized, the scene of the marvelous prayer, by which he prepared himself to face his enemies at the Diet of Worms, is one of those marked places in his wonderful life that reveal his spirit and strength. We see him humble in spirit and strong in the Lord. With his hand upon God's word, and his heart bur-

dened with the awful realities that were closing about him, he made a solemn vow to God to stand firm for his truth, though his fidelity might incur death. It is a wonder that Luther ever came out of that storm of human passion alive. The excited assembly was awed to silence by his heroic appeal: "I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen!"

The monk, made strong by his agony of prayer, vanquished his accusers. He saved an Empire. He redeemed the Church from the bondage of her corruption.

Lest the rejoicing world should make a hero of the instrument, and forget that the power was of God, and that to God belonged the glory, the conquering Reformer is hurried into retirement.

The imprisonment in Wartburg Castle seemed to throw a cloud over the Reformation. But it gave Luther rest and time for meditation. While Luther rested, God worked out larger opportunities, and prepared the people for new advances. Luther came out of his retirment clothed with new power. He soon found opportunity for his old courage, and met a King as fearlessly as he had met a Pope. Henry of England found his match in the German Reformer.

If we had time to trace Luther's labors in the work of reconstruction, we would find that they revealed the same

devotion and faithfulness which we have discovered in the midst of these thrilling events that resulted in the breaking of the yoke of Rome.

I have imperfectly outlined a great character. I have shown you the shadow of a remarkable life.

Hardly filling God's allotted time, Luther turned his face towards the humble German village within which he was born. He went home to revive the memories of his youth. God suddenly took him and made his youth perpetual. Wherever this Gospel of grace is preached, so long as men believe that "by grace they are saved through faith," Martin Luther will be remembered as the man of faith and courage who revolutionized the world with the truth of the word of God.

"Our strength is weakness in the fight,
Our courage soon defection ;
But comes a Warrior clad in might,
A prince of God's election :
Who is this wondrous Chief
That brings this glad relief?
The field of battle boasts
Christ Jesus, Lord of Hosts,
Still conq'ring and to conquer."

Gaylord
PAMPHLET BINDER
Syracuse, N. Y.
Stockton, Calif.

BW2222 .D55
Martin Luther : a sketch of his
Princeton Theological Seminary-Speer Library
1 1012 00073 9104